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ABSTRACT

Canada is the second largest country in the world and contains two dominant languages and cultures, the French-speaking province of Quebec and the English-speaking border cities. To maintain some link between the two coasts, the government requires that its national broadcasting system contribute to the development of national unity and present a continuing expression of Canadian identity. Therefore, when the Parti Quebecois assumed provincial power in 1976 on a platform of separation of Quebec from the Canadian confederation, the Canadian government reacted by appointing a committee of inquiry to monitor Radio Canada for signs of French separatist bias. The committee report discussed the following three aspects in which the National Broadcasting Service had not lived up to its mandate: over-centralized production and programming in Toronto and Montreal had resulted in failure to serve the special needs of the geographic regions; separate French and English networks isolated services and halted the flow and exchange of cultural information; and dependence on American television programing did not allow for a continuing expression of Canadian identity. (MAI)

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A CANADIAN DILEMMA: Divided Media in a Divided Land

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I

I have recently returned from living in Canada while on sabbatical leave and shuttling between Ottawa and Montreal in studying the French- and English- Canadian mass media system. Today I will discuss the background of the land, the people, and the political duality which exists between French- and English- Canadians. I will focus attention on the rise of the Parti Quebecois in Quebec and the ensuing national inquiry into Separatist bias in the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

II

Canada is the second largest country in the world, stretching from east to west over seven time zones and 4,500 miles. The ten provinces and two territories are bounded by three oceans: the Atlantic, the Arctic, and the Pacific. At its deepest point Canada traverses 2,800 miles from south to north, but its total area of 3.85 million square miles is inhabited by only 22 million people.

George Woodcock, writing in Canada and the Canadians, comments, "Even to say that the 22 million people of

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Canada, spread over their 3,850,000 square miles, make a population density of less than 6 [persons] per square mile, does not give the true idea of the country's emptiness, since they are by no means spread over the country in an even ratio." It is in the immense size and vast emptiness that a national broadcasting system as an east-west link becomes a vital necessity for Canada.

Whether the connection be the Trans-Continental Highway, the Canadian-Pacific Railway, or a national broadcasting system, linking Canadians from coast to coast has become a national preoccupation. Canada was the first country in the world to use a domestic satellite to broadcast within its own borders. Indeed, the current Broadcasting Act (1968) requires that the National Broadcasting Service "contribute to the development of national unity and provide for a continuing expression of Canadian identity."

Over the sweep of the land, one must superimpose the diversity of the people. Canada is a land of immigrants. The six most widely spoken languages in Canada, after English and French, are Italian, German, Ukranian, Native Indian, Greek, and Chinese. Quebec is the ancestral home of the French in Canada. More than 80 per cent of the provincial population is French-speaking and French-originating. There are, moreover, a million Francophones living in other parts of Canada; half of the province of New Brunswick now speaks French.

There are only two official languages in Canada, English and French. The French have been in Quebec for 400 years. Two hundred years ago they lost control of North America on the Plains of Abraham when they were defeated by the British at Quebec City. Their culture and language, however, have survived, as has their determination to maintain them, especially since the Second World War.

Not only have the French-Canadians struggled to preserve their cultural and linguistic identity in the midst of English-Canadians and other ethnic groups, they have also fought to protect their individuality despite the proximity of their large and culturally domineering neighbor to the south. Indeed, all Canadians have shared the concern of not losing their identity by being swallowed up by the United States. Eighty per cent of all Canadians live within 150 miles of the American border in a thin line 4,000 miles long.

A. W. Johnson, president of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, observes, "In examining the U. S. cultural penetration of Canada, it is striking to note that for English-Canadians the biggest cultural problem of the 1920s was the danger of Americanization by a new-fangled gadget called radio." In 1929 the Aird Commission (first Canadian Royal Commission on Broadcasting) in response to fears that

American radio networks would dominate Canada recommended "the creation of a Crown Corporation to give Canadians a service of their own and to serve areas in which commercial radio was uneconomical."

In the 1930s Canadians created the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission and then the CBC sc that there would be strong Canadian radio broadcasting services in both languages, French and English, which were not merely extensions of the private commercial operations of the United States.

Both CBC radio networks (English and French) developed simultaneously and separately, and in 1952 television operations began in French from Montreal and English from Toronto. Today the CBC French network operates from the second largest television facility in the world, the Maison de Radio-Canada in Montreal. Radio-Canada, the French arm of the CBC, produces more French programming than any other network in the world, including the national network of France.

Radio-Canada creates its own programming and only occasionally dubs into French, American television shows or English CBC productions. Over 3,000 employees of Maison de Radio-Canada contribute to this great creative enterprise. Contrast this creativity, this sense of self with English Canada's cultural submission to cable television and the plethora of American shows and commercial values beamed

across the border. Indeed, nineteen of the top twenty TV shows in Canada are American; only Hockey Night in Canada breaks into those ratings. Here is no strong sense of Canadian identity. For French-Canadians, however, there is Radio-Canada with its own language and recognizably French-Canadian creative programming.

On November 15, 1976, a political event of tremendous magnitude affected Canada as a whole in a way no other had before. The Parti Quebecois led by Rene Levesque assumed provincial power on a platform of eventual separation of Quebec from the Canadian confederation. Levesque, after two earlier defeats, played his cards well in this last and most important hand. Rather than threatening immediate secession, he promised a free and open referendum to determine whether Quebecers wanted to form an independent country. Basing his campaign largely on the need for good, clean government in opposition to the entrenched Liberal Party of Robert Bourassa, Levesque swept into power. Quebec is now preparing for the eventual referendum -- promised for early in 1979.

The hint of separation may have come as a tremendous surprise to the rest of Canada, but for the province of Quebec, this was an issue whose time had come. Since the end of World War II, the French-Canadian majority of Quebec felt as if it were a minority in its own province. The wealth of Quebec was in the hands of English-Canadians

and foreign groups, primarily Americans and Britishers. Better jobs went to the English-speaking Canadians, and the more menial tasks were assigned to the French. The emergence of the Parti Quebecois could have been predicted in view of the frustration that results from a minority's subjugation of the majority in a province as large and potentially wealthy as Quebec.

By the end of February 1977, federal ministers began to attack Radio-Canada for what they contended was a Separatist bias. There were criticisms by the Secretary of State, John Roberts, who is responsible to Parliament for the CBC; by Industry Minister, Jean Chretien; by Urban Affairs Minister, Andre Ouellet; and by Senator Jean Marchand. Initially Prime Minister Trudeau chided his ministers for voicing their criticism at a politically wrong time. Then, when pressed in Commons by the opposition, Trudeau responded:

> I do not think the opposition appears to be aware, and I am telling them with all the candor I can command, that almost everyone, including high officials of the CBC, would be prepared to concede that the overwhelming majority of employees in Radio-Canada are of Separatist leaning.... There is a very real concern on the part of many citizens, particularly those who listen to Radio-Canada, that

> that can be a Separatist propaganda machine. Indeed, it can be used to get the people of Quebec to believe more in separation than in federalism. This government is very concerned about that. We are trying to act on that in a proper fashion.

There were suggestions in the Senate that CBC officials be summoned before a Senate committee to answer to the charge of what might be called a failure of objectivity. Former Conservative leader Robert Stanfield proposed that the matter be referred to a Commons committee. A Conservative M.P. suggested that the government monitor Radio-Canada for signs of bias; Prime Minister Trudeau said he would discuss the idea with the Communications Minister, Jean Sauve.

In letters dated March 4 and 8, 1977, the Prime Minister invited the Canadian Radio Television Commission, which is the official broadcasting regulator, to establish an inquiry as to whether the English and French radio and television networks of the CBC "generally, and in particular, their public affairs, information and news programming, are fulfilling the mandate of the Corporation" as set out in the Broadcasting Act. According to that legislation the National Broadcasting Service should:

(1) be a balanced service of information, enlightenment and entertainment for people of different ages, interests and tastes covering the whole range of programming in fair proportion,

(2) be extended to all parts of Canada, as public funds become available,

(3) be in English and French, serving the special needs of geographic regions, and actively contributing to the flow and exchange of cultural and regional information and entertainment, and

(4) contribute to the development of national unity and provide for a continuing expression of Canadian identity.

The Vancouver Province of March 5 highlighted the problem:

> We cannot imagine the CRTC turning handstands with glee at the prospects of inquiring into bias in Radio-Canada. The decision about CBC's role could be very tricky. For instance, the Broadcasting Act says the Canadian Broadcasting System

has the duty of providing 'reasonable, balanced, opportunity for the expression of differing views on matters of public concern.' In other words, broadcasting, in general, should include a wide expression of free opinion. Does Radio-Canada do that in Quebec? But the Broadcasting Act also says that the CBC must 'contribute to the development of national unity and provide for a continuing expression of Canadian identity.' Does Radio-Canada do that in Quebec?

The Montreal Gazette further defines the issue:

> But Separatists and Separatism will not disappear so easily from Quebec, and particularly not from such an institution as Radio-Canada.... Distasteful though it may be to the government, nationalism has been the dominant characteristic of Quebec for at least the past two decades, if not for the past two centuries. With the advent of a Separatist party, that is even more pronounced. Separatism is now the vogue; it is stylish, and it is an assumption of life for those who are young and creative. Non-Separatists are plentiful in many sectors

> of Quebec society, but not among journalists or teachers or broadcasters or those who can be broadly described as creative. Like it or not, that is the way it appears to be.

A Committee of Inquiry was established on March 14, 1977 and given only four months to make its findings known. Noted members of the committee included Harry J. Boyle, Chairman of the Canadian Radio Television Committee and Dr. Northrup Frye. Five other CRTC commissioners served on the committee.

In its report the committee discussed three aspects in which the National Broadcasting Service had "significant deficiencies" in living up to its mandate. These were (1) by over-centralizing production and programming in Toronto and Montreal and by the orientation of the CBC to events in and around these centers, it had failed to serve "the special needs of geographic regions"; (2) by separating the French and English networks into two distinct and isolated services both conceptually and physically, it had failed in its responsibility for "actively contributing to the flow and exchange of cultural and regional information and entertainment"; (3) by the English network's heavy dependence on American television programming and excessive reliance on its own internal resources, it had failed "to provide for a continuing expression of Canadian identity."

The Committee of Inquiry, in addition, specifically

chided the CBC for failing to facilitate true communication and interaction between English- and French- speaking Canadians. They noted that the difference between French and English treatment of Canadian news was striking. The main focus of French television newscasts was Quebec, with almost half the newscast time devoted to Quebec stories. Moreover, at least one-third of the national Canadian stories showed a marked Quebec point of view, and much of the news classified as "other Canadian provinces" involved reactions to the developments in Quebec.

English newscasts were found to have a low coverage of Quebec in proportion to its importance; about twelve per cent of their content dealt with Quebec. In an examination of English and French national evening radio news-scripts during the four-month period from September through December 1976, it was found that only three per cent of the CBC French newscasts dealt with any part of Canada other than Quebec. The CBC English newscasts devoted eighteen per cent of their coverage to parts of Canada other than Quebec and nine per cent to Quebec stories. This occurred, moreover, when the general election that brought Rene Levesque to power was taking place.

The committee concluded that newscasts played a very limited role in shaping common values and norms between the language groups and tended to reinforce differences

along linguistic lines. It was not the content but the omissions from the newscasts that caused problems of national disunity. Each network's lack of interest in the other part of Canada was reinforced by differences in outlook, spirit, and working methods of French and English journalists. It was reinforced even more by a structural quirk of the CBC that encourages separate development of the two networks, which a respected CBC personality has trenchantly described as a "working model of how the country will fail."

The Committee of Inquiry found that both the English and French networks were biased because insofar as they were able, they prevented Canadians from getting enough balanced information about Canada to make informed decisions about the country's future. They were biased by their assumptions about what was newsworthy and what their audiences wanted to hear: (1) only Canadians living along the St. Lawrence axis, from Quebec to Hamilton, belong in the news; all others were some kind of Canadian fauna living in the "boondocks" to be noticed only when they did something picturesque, and (2) English Canadians could not care less about what happend to French Canadians and vice versa.

With all its criticisms, the Committee of Inquiry admitted that "if we did not have the CBC, we would have to invent it." Most important of all, it was abundantly clear

from the letters received by the committee that the Canadian public wanted the CBC and felt a need for it. The Canadian public still had more confidence in the CBC than in any other instrument of communication in Canada.

But the report made no mention of Separatist bias. In fact, the committee received only fifty out of 1,200 letters, or about four per cent, which mentioned a Separatist bias. The Prime Minister accepted the report on July 20, 1977 and tabled it in the House of Commons that very afternoon. Since that day no further public action has been taken with regard to this issue.

From a high authority in the CBC, I learned that "a few broadcasters were relieved of their responsibilities for lack of professional journalistic standards." The problem, says Ray Chaisson, Director of Television, CBC English, Montreal, is that the "political issue in Quebec has so polarized the audience that it becomes very difficult, if not impossible, for journalists to remain objective and balanced in their reporting." The CBC English network in Quebec has a much easier task than its French counterpart, inasmuch as the Anglophone constituency of CBC is almost totally supportive of the Federalist point of view. However, Radio-Canada finds its Francophone audience split between those who support the confederation and those who uphold the Separatist position. Audiences exert enormous pressures upon their journalists to support

their preferred point of view.

III

In retrospect, the inquiry into the CBC probably would not have taken place were it not as a manifestation of a shocked nation awakening too late to the fact that there had been a smoldering issue of grave concern to the French and English cultures for the past two and a half decades. Indeed, there are those who claim that though the fire has only recently been discovered, the smoke had been there for nearly two hundred years.

The shock has worn off, and the realization is present everywhere in Canada that the possibility of separation is real and that, rather than avoiding the Separatist issue for fear of it being considered Separatist bias, it is now deemed the responsibility of the CBC to inform the public of the options and implications of the Separatist movement. Since November 1976 over 50,000 Anglophone Quebecers have left the province. It is anticipated that prior to the referendum in 1979, 100,000 English-speaking Quebecers will have departed. This represents ten per cent of the Anglophone population of Montreal. The crisis is real.

It is true that one can fault the CBC, as the Committee of Inquiry did, for not including more French news on English programs and more English news on French programs and for not having a greater carryover from one network to the other.

But the country is in trouble, and in the final analysis, is it not really a case of blaming the messenger because Canada's news is bad? If all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty Dumpty back together again, why blame the CBC?